

EDUCATION IN NORTHERN IRELAND

If we want a united community, then we must start with children. They live largely from birth in two main communities, and when they attend school they remain mostly confined in these two communities. All the evidence points to the fact that compassion and empathy are low where there is physical distance and where relationships are not reciprocal. Prejudice, hatred and sectarianism are fuelled by a lack of contact. Segregating children in schools epitomises sectarian distancing and absence of reciprocity. This cannot be right. The churches claim that it exemplifies the diversity of our educational system, but it is only so for the religious organisations and crucially lacks diversity for the children who are educated separately in them. They need to experience diversity themselves so that they understand the different perspectives and engage directly with them. They can only successfully do that by being educated together.

Education plays a crucial role in Humanist thought because we believe it is the duty of every community to make the future better than the present. Education is an investment, not only or even mainly in a narrow economic sense but also morally and socially. The fostering of freethought, tolerance and compromise is an important part of the process, yet this aspect is largely neglected in the province, and the reasons are clear. They include the class division within the system, in which ‘secondary’ schools are mainly for working class children and ‘grammar’ schools are mainly for middle class children. We shall return to this issue later.

As far as religion is concerned, many or even most of the schools in Northern Ireland are faith schools. This is both historical and in terms of the people who have gone into teaching. The main faiths – Catholic, Presbyterian, Methodist, Quaker and so on – set up schools going back centuries in some cases. Also, a large

EDUCATION IN NORTHERN IRELAND

percentage of religious people enter teaching because they see it as a religious mission. Teachers are also exempt from fair employment legislation. Therefore schools can appoint teachers based upon their religious denomination and religious beliefs. There are no secular schools here. Taking those points together, it is clear that parents do not have much of a choice in this matter.

Schools, then, are church-related and, even where they are not, the main churches retain a strong say in the appointment of teachers and the running of the schools. Controlled or state schools are attended mainly by Protestant pupils, staffed mainly by Protestant teachers and have management committees containing representatives of the Protestant churches. Maintained schools are attended almost entirely by Catholic pupils and staffed almost entirely by Catholic teachers. Voluntary Schools are mainly long-established grammar schools of either the Catholic or Protestant tradition but in some cases may now contain a fairly big percentage of the 'other' culture. Integrated schools are legally bound to achieve an approximate balance of Catholic and protestant pupils and staff and to a management committee that represents the two main denominations in equal proportions. However, they educate only 7% of pupils and many of them have a distinctly Christian ethos.

This Christocentric nature of the schools must be ended. The Mission Statements of most of them are almost invariably presented in Christian terms; there is a compulsory assembly for Christian worship; and the RE syllabus is almost exclusively Christian. Children are thus denied the opportunity to make their own choices from among the alternative life stances. Parents, of course, can insist that a pupil be excused from RE classes and collective worship, but this is often made difficult by the response that schools would have problems with alternative arrangements. There is even evidence that some schools are effectively making it

EDUCATION IN NORTHERN IRELAND

a condition of entry that this right is not exercised. As many integrated schools have a strong Christian ethos, here too the non-believer has a struggle to assert his or her parental rights. Note too that in England and Wales, pupils post-16 may opt out of Assembly and RE without having to gain the consent of their parents, but this right does not exist in Northern Ireland.

Throughout the educational system the right of the child not to be indoctrinated is flouted with impunity. This would be bad enough in any society, but in one where Christians are themselves so divided, it is a scandal. Since the schools are largely segregated on sectarian lines, the children are effectively brainwashed into one or other particular brand of Christianity. They are the victims of a primitive concept of schooling in which our two main warring tribes seek to pass on to the next generation their own rituals, customs and beliefs. The entire system therefore effectively negates Article 18 of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (1948) and Articles 13 and 14 of *The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child* (1989) which state that every child has a right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion and a right to think and believe what they want and to seek and receive all kinds of information, as long as it is within the law.

Schools in Northern Ireland are legally bound to have collective worship and an RE Core Syllabus, drawn up by the four main Christian churches, that in all Key Stages is heavily Christian except for Key Stage 3 where two world religions are included. Humanism or Philosophy or genuine comparative religion do not feature, though individual teachers may introduce them in their lessons. In other words, a broadening out of the subject of RE beyond the narrow confines of the syllabus depends on the discretion of individual teachers, which is hardly a foolproof method of widening the children's moral and spiritual horizons.

EDUCATION IN NORTHERN IRELAND

This privileged position for Christianity has been even questioned even by many Christians. In December 2015, the Woolf Institute in Cambridge published its Commission's report on Religion and Belief in British Public Life, entitled *Living with Difference*, which argued that Northern Ireland is not well served by this Core Syllabus. It stated: "RE in Catholic schools is denominational in nature, the emphasis being on faith formation. In controlled schools it must be non-denominational and is usually largely focused on Biblical material. In integrated schools it is a mixture of both, because Catholic parents still expect their children's sacramental preparation to take place in primary schools. In consequence, Catholics and Protestants are moving in rather different educational directions when it comes to religious awareness and understanding. World religions had no formal place in the core syllabus until 2007, and even now study of them is only available for Key Stage 3 pupils, on the basis of the Churches' argument that younger children would be confused".

The report suggested that growing numbers of children and young people from other cultural and religious backgrounds "are not well served by a churches-devised RE core syllabus that positions itself as having an essential Christian character". It called for RE to be renamed and "given an explicitly educational rather than confessional focus". Non-religious world views, such as Humanism, should be included. This is surely necessary in an increasingly diverse society where, according to a recent BBC/RTE survey, 23% of the people here have no religion. Yet they are totally ignored in this restrictive RE syllabus.

The report also suggests that collective worship should be scrapped in favour of an inclusive 'time for reflection', drawing upon a range of sources that are appropriate for pupils and staff of all religions and beliefs, that will contribute to their spiritual, moral, social and cultural development. Worship is inappropriate

EDUCATION IN NORTHERN IRELAND

in a place of education and should be confined to the home and the church. This is similar to the *Toledo Guiding Principles* on teaching about religion and beliefs issued by the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) in 2007 which recommends the introduction of a subject under the curriculum called Education about Religions, Beliefs and Ethics (ERB).

Humanists would generally welcome the above proposals that RE should be renamed and broadened to include more religions and non-religious worldviews. It should be given an explicitly educational rather than confessional focus and applied to all state-funded schools. Arguably, however, Philosophy should be central to the new subject. Thus RE could be renamed Philosophy, Religion and Ethics (PRE). The importance of Philosophy, which is largely ignored in the Ulster school curriculum, should be stressed. Studies have shown that having a philosophy session at least once a week results in even 9 and 10 year old children making more rapid progress in reading and maths. This effect is particularly marked among children from disadvantaged backgrounds. By encouraging clarity, rigour and logical analysis, philosophy raises IQ and assists greatly in transferring skills.

Children are also naturally inquisitive and eager to understand the world around them. Philosophy inspires wonder and provides the thinking tools to explore answers to the fundamental questions of the human condition. And, of course, as we have already argued, Philosophy promotes tolerance and open-mindedness by increasing awareness of different perspectives. The French philosopher Descartes argued that childhood is where prejudices are born, which only philosophy can overcome. It continually encourages the questioning of assumptions behind important decisions and powerful institutions, a skill which is not only vital in work but also helps young people to resist indoctrination and groupthink and instead to seek their own truths. Finally,

EDUCATION IN NORTHERN IRELAND

Philosophy is studied in educational systems throughout the world and the UN says that it should be in the curriculum of all schools.

Humanists naturally wish to see a secular society, that is, one in which religion has disappeared as a social force. We have the right to insist that the state should be secular and in a truly pluralist society that would indeed be the case. This is not to deny that life may have an important ‘spiritual’ dimension, but it accepts that Christians do not have a monopoly of ‘spirituality’, as we shall argue later. In this situation religious groups are free to promote their cause, but in equal competition with others. Yet Ulster children have an RE syllabus which seeks not to open children’s minds but to keep them firmly closed. It is a denial of their basic right to learn about all the major life stances and ideologies adopted by the peoples of this world. As Brice Dickson and Conor McCormick state in their article *The Right to Education for Humanity*, published in the *Northern Ireland Legal Quarterly* in November 2016, children should receive an education that equips them to be world citizens rather than ‘captives’ of any particular creed, view of history or community tradition.

*

More than two decades after the pledge in the Good Friday Agreement to ‘facilitate and encourage integrated education’, children in Northern Ireland are still divided by religion. To be more accurate, 93% attend institutions which are religiously segregated. This was not the case in the years before partition and, when the statelet was founded in 1921, the first Education Minister tried to re-establish an integrated system, but the plan was opposed by the main churches and it was abandoned. Since then, there have been two separate education systems. The state or ‘controlled’ system is de facto Protestant and mainly attended by Protestants, and there are also a number of voluntary grammar schools attended predominantly by Protestants. Catholics attend schools which are all grant maintained as opposed to state

EDUCATION IN NORTHERN IRELAND

controlled. Although they are also state financed, they are operated by the Catholic Church administered through the Council of Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS). Since 1981, when Lagan College opened its doors, a total of 65 integrated schools have been created, but they teach only 7% of the total pupils.

It is an inherently inefficient system. A 2019 report from Ulster University's UNESCO Centre ([*Isolated Together: Pairs of Primary Schools Duplicating Provision*](#)) has shown that having effectively divided primary schools in close proximity causes financial inefficiencies. The authors studied 32 instances of isolated pairs of schools. In isolated pairs both Protestant and Catholic primary schools exist in close proximity but one or both may be too small to be sustainable. The report estimated that each of the 32 school pairs received an additional £2.3m each year, “compared to the average cost to support the same pupils in combined schools in each location”. In 2019 the UK parliament's Northern Ireland affairs committee found that “there was a large amount of wasted capacity in the [education] system”. The number of empty places is about one fifth of the entire number available (71,000 in 2015, according to the Audit Office).

The system is also inherently immoral. The vast majority of children are daily presented in their educational environment with separate sporting and linguistic cultures, separate conceptions of what it means to be a Christian, and separate visions of their historical past. An example of the last difference can be illustrated in the CCEA History syllabus for GCSE. One optional unit of study is ‘Northern Ireland and its Neighbours, 1920 to 1949’, while the alternative is ‘Northern Ireland and its Neighbours, 1965 to 1998’. A 2020 study under the auspices of the *Parallel Histories* charity found that the overwhelming majority of Catholic schools teach the more modern unit, which includes civil rights and the Troubles, whereas nearly half of state schools

EDUCATION IN NORTHERN IRELAND

choose the earlier period which includes the unionist ascendancy and Northern Ireland's part in the defeat of the Nazis in the Second World War. It should be obvious that the earlier period provides material that is favourable to Protestants/unionists, whereas the later period provides material that is favourable to Catholics/nationalists. In other words, the schools are generally choosing periods that bolster their own traditions and prejudices while avoiding parts of history that challenge them. They do not have to engage with the 'other' historical narrative.

To suggest that these differences are insignificant and that they are largely irrelevant to the divisions in the wider community is to blind oneself to the realities of a deeply divisive educational system. Segregated education clearly fosters division and conflict. The mere fact of separate schooling is bound to encourage, or certainly not to discourage, mutual suspicion and hostility and thus greatly reduce the possibilities of social contact afterwards. 58% of young people aged 18 to 34 have few or no friends from religious groups other than their own. Segregated schools therefore serve to reinforce segregation in other areas, such as marriage, work, housing, politics, recreation, and religion itself. Segregated schooling is therefore a major obstacle to social integration in Northern Ireland.

A large body of research data suggests that separation risks maintaining ignorance and reinforcing binary perceptions of 'us' and 'them', whereas contact and collaboration creates the conditions for generating mutual respect and understanding. Studies, such as those by Claire McGlynn, have found that integrated education impacts positively on identity, out-group attitudes and forgiveness and reconciliation, including an increase in the number of intercommunity friendships amongst those attending or having attended integrated schools. As the *The Report of the Independent Review of Integrated Education* (2016)

EDUCATION IN NORTHERN IRELAND

states: “Individuals who have experienced positive, friendly, and co-operative contact with members of another group tend to have lower levels of prejudice, are more trusting, experience greater empathy, and are less anxious about interacting with that group”.

Why, therefore does religious segregation still exist? There is no doubt that the power of the churches is an important factor. The Catholic Church in particular has resisted all attempts at full-scale integration, maintaining that Catholic children must be educated in a Catholic ‘ethos’. It also argues that pluralism in education is a good thing, a disingenuous argument as we have seen since the children – for whom education exists in the first place – are themselves deprived of this very pluralism by being segregated. The government, for its part, has effectively enshrined segregated education through its 1992 decision to fund Catholic schools on an equal basis with ‘state’ schools. Of course, Protestant churches helped to build the present educational system in Northern Ireland and they too have opposed integration, though less vocally since the education minister has always until recently been Protestant and Bible readings are common in state schools. Individual Protestant churches have promoted their values by founding some grammar schools where they maintain a strong if discreet influence.

What of the parents themselves? After all, parental initiative has been the main factor leading to integration. And, according to all the opinion polls over the years, a clear majority support integrated schools. For example, a Sky Data poll in 2018 found that it was supported by 69% of the people. Yet we need to ask whether this preference is real or merely theoretical. Is it a case of many parents pretending to the pollsters be more tolerant than they really are? Does this shy prejudice manifest itself in a preference to send their children to schools with the same religious traditions as themselves? Studies have also shown that in

EDUCATION IN NORTHERN IRELAND

practice, as well as the ethno-religious character of the school, its perceived quality of education was a key criterion of choice. This perception itself is often based on the school's historical reputation rather than its actual current performance. In other words, the actual decision for many parents is based on religious and/or academic tradition rather than intelligent choice.

Integrated schooling is not the panacea for all ills but it is a necessary part of the jigsaw. As Mike Nesbitt has said, a single education system is the best tool available to tackle the 'toxic legacy of sectarianism in our society'. He added: "Mixing children from age four would provide a virtual inoculation against sectarian thoughts. As we approach Northern Ireland's centenary, I can think of no finer way to enter the next hundred years than with a commitment to educating all our children together" (*Belfast Telegraph*, 17th April 2018).

The politicians have set the example. There is a single community of representation, in which sworn enemies have to work together in the Assembly and the Executive. But we also need a single community of children, who work together in a friendly atmosphere so that they may love one another and be loved by one another. For prejudice feeds on distance and is killed by closeness. The opportunity now exists for schools to transfer to integrated status, and they should seize it. The churches and many of the parents must not stand in their way.

*

Free and compulsory post-primary schooling was introduced in Northern Ireland under the Education Act of 1947. Pupils attended primary schools up to age 11 years. At this point a selective examination was used to identify those pupils deemed to be best suited to the distinctive curricula provided by grammar schools and technical colleges. The remaining pupils, who constituted a majority of each cohort, attended secondary modern schools. The

EDUCATION IN NORTHERN IRELAND

technical element of the tripartite arrangement never got going and a bipartite system of grammar and secondary schools emerged. Of course, it was also bipartite in terms of the religious segregation we have discussed. Pupils were, and to a large extent still are, doubled segregated in terms of both religion and class.

The main difference envisaged between grammar and secondary model schools was that grammar schools would provide an academic curriculum as a route to higher education, whereas the main role of secondary moderns was to develop skills that would prepare pupils for work. The latter were not encouraged to take examinations and were not expected to stay beyond the school leaving age. However, it was increasingly recognised in the UK that this system is inherently flawed in two crucial senses. First, there is the weakness of a selection procedure at the early age of 11, especially when intelligence and ability continue to develop afterwards. Second, the system gives an unfair advantage to children of better off parents, who are themselves more likely to pass on the benefits of an academic education and can afford to pay for their children's private tuition. It is an unequal playing field, in terms of both the children themselves and the parents. Numerous studies and reports have confirmed this judgment. Thus the Queen's University study *Investigating Links to Achievement and Deprivation* (from the *Iliad* project) concluded in 2015 that academic selection reinforces 'privilege and disadvantage' and recommended that the system should be ended. It is clearly immoral to decide a child's potential ability or direction of life at such an early age.

Comprehensible education, on the other hand, is based on two simple principles: every child should have equal access to a broad and balanced education up to the age of 18; and all children should be educated together, regardless of class, faith, ethnic background or prior attainment. These requirements might seem

EDUCATION IN NORTHERN IRELAND

unrealistic, until we realise that they are already in practice in a number of countries. In Finland, for example, children do not start formal academic learning until seven and school selection is outlawed on both moral and economic grounds. Formal examinations (until the age of 18) and streaming by ability are also outlawed. The concepts of competition, choice, privatisation and league tables simply do not exist. In countries such as Norway, Sweden, Denmark, New Zealand, Australia, Canada and Japan the overwhelming majority of children attend comprehensive schools up to 15 or 16. They feature regularly at or near the top in tables of educational attainment.

There are many advantages of comprehensive education. Large comprehensives teach a wider range of subjects as well as providing a wider range of facilities than purely academic institutions like grammar schools. This allows all children to reach their potential through a number of avenues other than just academic ones. True mixed ability teaching also means that classrooms are full of children of all abilities so that the weaker students can learn from stronger ones. Moreover, setting and streaming within comprehensives allows pupils to move between sets or streams depending on their changing abilities, making for a more tailored education as well as allowing lower ability students to make better progress. Finally, they help create a common culture whereby one social group learns about the dynamics of another and so helps pull down social barriers and so removing social-class barriers.

Now it is true that Northern Ireland's A Level students often perform better than their counterparts in England and Wales, both in terms of pass rates and A* and A grades. As 42% of post-primary children attend grammar schools, this success is sometimes used as an argument for the rebirth of grammar schools in Great Britain – an argument championed, for example, by

EDUCATION IN NORTHERN IRELAND

Theresa May – and for their entrenchment here. It is presented as clear evidence not only that those who attend them do better than children in comprehensives but also that grammar schools are a potent agent of social mobility by giving bright working class kids the chance of academic success and a better start in life. It is even insisted that scrapping grammar schools would increase social inequality.

But it is a myth. The main engines of social mobility in the UK in the last 50 years were the expansion of both free higher education and professional and white-collar jobs. My working class mother would never have pushed me to pass the 11-plus if there were university fees and no better prospects after graduation. The pre-school and primary years also play an important part in giving a child a good start on the road to educational success. Poorer families without support lack the financial or cultural capital to keep up with middle class children. Research clearly indicates that if children are then treated as ‘failures’ at an early age, they will tend to think and behave as expected of them. It’s a clear example of the law of the self-fulfilling prophecy.

All the evidence for England demonstrates that for this reason grammar schools actually increase social inequality. Those who don’t pass an 11-plus test in the areas where it exists do worse than they would have done in a comprehensive system. It wastes more talent and potential than it nourishes. In a *New Statesman* article (25th September 2016), Adrian Smith cited the example of Kent, where the Conservative-controlled council zealously protected selection. There is clear evidence that it reinforces social deprivation and limited aspiration in the poorest areas. In Thanet a third of children live in poverty and make up less than 9% of pupils in grammar schools but 30% at secondary moderns. University admissions tutors confirm the low numbers of applications from areas such as Thanet relative to the UK average.

EDUCATION IN NORTHERN IRELAND

Though many of Kent's secondary moderns exceed expectations, the county has the most underperforming schools in the UK.

In short, grammar schools provide education for the middle classes and social mobility for the few at the expense of social decline for the many. This is why the achievement gap for Northern Ireland is the widest in Europe. No schools in England have such poor results as the lowest achieving schools here. This underachievement in Northern Ireland is one of the worst scandals, along with sectarian segregation. An Audit Office report in 2021 stated that there was a 30% differential in grades at GCSE between those brought up in affluent areas and those classed as areas of social deprivation. In 2018-19 less than half of school leavers who had been entitled to free school meals achieved at least five GCSEs, whereas 79% of non-free school meal entitled school leavers achieved the equivalent.

Underachievement is also worse among Protestant children, despite the fact that all Official Unionist and DUP MLAs and over 99% of their party members are Protestant, generally favour selection and grammar schools. Protestant free school meal boys are close to the bottom of the UK GCSE league table, just above Irish Travellers and Roma children. Catholic grammar schools, on the other hand, regularly outperform their Protestant counterparts: In most years the top achieving schools at A Level are mostly Catholic. In 2015 the top 11 schools were actually all Catholic. Almost half of all Catholic girls from lower socioeconomic backgrounds go on to higher education, in contrast to fewer than a third of Protestant boys from similar backgrounds.

Despite all the research proving that the 11-plus comes far too early in a child's intellectual development, especially for boys who mature more slowly than girls, the current Northern Ireland system entrenches selection. These are retrograde steps that cannot

EDUCATION IN NORTHERN IRELAND

be good for children or the wider society. Where are the political leaders of the Protestant working class in Northern Ireland who are prepared to represent the real interests of their children and campaign vigorously for the end of such an outdated, unjust and divisive educational system?

Brian McClinton, May 2021